

# Secrets of Romantic Suspense: A Series of Eight Lectures

By Lisa Gardner

*This continues this series of eight lectures, which started with the first installment, "Introduction."*

## **Lecture VI. Sexual Tension, oh la la**

The Gothics got it right: The brooding man, the mysterious woman. The burning attraction that might finally illuminate their lives or plunge them once and for all into darkness. The Gothics mix the perfect combination of danger and desire, and even if you don't want to set your books in an abandoned castle, there's no reason not to learn from them.

Sexual tension adds so much to suspense. It contributes to mystery: Is this person friend or foe? It ratchets up the tension, keeping the reader flipping pages until the late hours of the night. It complicates the plot—there's nothing simple about love or lust. Finally, it exposes your characters. Sex makes people vulnerable and in suspense novels, your characters generally can't afford to be vulnerable. They want, they fear, they need. This is potent stuff.

Personally, I like sexual tension to closely track the suspense plot. In the beginning, the unexpected spark between hero and heroine is just one more problem to be solved. It contributes to conflict, as well as providing plenty of snappy dialogue.

Then, as danger mounts, so does desire. The external conflict throws your hero and heroine together, whether they like it or not. They become allies, albeit grudgingly. Then, as they work together on an increasingly puzzling or dangerous case, their attraction becomes one more thing each is trying to manage. Of course, you keep throwing more and more at the protagonists. And as the future becomes increasingly uncertain, the need for personal connection becomes even more paramount.

This is when you can start having fun. First off, you now have your reader engaged on two levels: What bad thing is going to happen next? Oh, and when are these two gonna get it on? That's perfect. Your novel now basically contains a double-dose of suspense.

Secondly, you can use your characters in this heightened state to reveal one another. They are learning to respect one another. They are also afraid. And like people in any intense situation, they push at each other, wearing down layers and helping reveal the true person underneath. This is another reason why you don't want to dump too much of your character's backstory early on—it's far more effective to have your hero or heroine pull it out now, deep in the heart of your novel. Hearing someone else's secret fear or inner desire is like receiving a gift, it binds you to the person and builds a connection. By halfway through your romantic suspense novel, danger and desire should be binding your hero and heroine like glue. While logically they may still have reasons to hold back, emotionally they are connecting whether they want to or not. Then, by helping each other out, they layer their mutual desire with respect and trust.

Ultimately, of course, the characters come together in a tumultuous mix of passion, vulnerability, and hope. Maybe it's the classic "grateful-to-be-alive-sex" that follows a life-threatening situation. Or maybe it's a tender moment, the quiet before the storm. Either way, this release of physical tension makes a great "breather" for the reader right before you ratchet the plot back up again.

Now, in a romance novel it is imperative to reestablish conflict between the hero and heroine even after sex. In romantic suspense, you have even more tools to draw upon. Maybe the situation is so dangerous, it's really not the time to be thinking long term. Maybe each character thinks the other is only responding to the intensity of the situation. Or, like normal people, maybe your characters are simply afraid. Falling in love is a tricky thing. It raises all sorts of demons of self-doubt, fear, mistrust and low self-esteem. It's okay to have your characters experience these things. It makes them human, and it makes them real.

Of course, your plot is still escalating. As the book draws closer to the climatic end, you are being a good writer and steadily building the stakes. In fact, it's even easier now. Whereas your heroine once feared for only her life, now she also fears for the life of a man she's grown to love. While your hero expected to stand alone, now he has someone to fight for—and someone to lose.

Since your characters aren't ready to express this level of emotional intensity in words yet, they'll have to have lots of sex instead. The reader understands.

Whereas, in the beginning of the novel, sexual tension is part of the conflict, toward the end of the novel, it's almost the opposite. Your hero and heroine are united now, bonded by their mutual external goal to eradicate evil and save the day. Sex becomes their reprieve, a series of bittersweet moments as evil gathers outside the gate. Of course, they still fight and butt heads, that's part of their passion. But the external goal keeps bringing them back together, and the hot, steamy sex proves they're destined to stay that way—if they survive the day.

In a romantic suspense novel, it's always best to end with the hero and heroine. Sure, they slay the bad guy. But the final spotlight shouldn't be on his dead body, it should be on them walking away into the sunset. The reader has followed their journey and wants to be assured of their happiness. Now, maybe you don't want to end with the conventional pledge of marriage. In mainstream suspense, that's certainly okay. But you should still end with the hope of the hero or heroine getting together. It's simply more satisfying. Your characters have fought the good fight, and now love shall prevail.

### **Conclusion**

When done properly, sexual tension adds to suspense, aids conflict, and helps develop characters. It provides emotional pull in your novel, as well as emotional release. It also adds an elemental edge where characters' instincts are basic, raw and needy. In other words, it can be lots of fun.

Next up, using resting moments to balance your nerve-jangling plots.